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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000854

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/14/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ES](#)
SUBJECT: ARENA FILLS STADIUM, BUT CROWD SUBDUED; NO VP
CANDIDATE YET

REF: 2007 SAN SALVADOR 2269

Classified By: The Ambassador, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[11](#). (C) Summary: Emboffs attended the July 13 ARENA (conservative, pro-U.S.) political rally at Cutscatlan Stadium, the same venue where the opposition FMLN staged their November 11 rally. The overflow crowd was equal in size to the FMLN event, but less enthusiastic than ARENA. Presidential candidate Rodrigo Avila might have hoped. Avila, who appeared relaxed, performed well but made no announcement regarding his running mate. Recent polling has Avila some 14 points behind FMLN candidate Mauricio Funes (with 23.2 and 37.5 percent, respectively), though voters who are undecided, do not respond, and will not vote, still make up 38.6 percent of respondents. The presidential election will be held March 15, 2009. End Summary.

Good Crowd, But Subdued

[12](#). (SBU) Emboffs attended the July 13 ARENA political rally at the Cutscatlan Stadium in San Salvador. ARENA had been building expectations for the rally for nearly a week and bused in thousands of supporters from around the country. Most departments and factions seemed well-represented; there were reports, however, that approximately 20 buses of ARENA supporters were detained in Usulután due to a diesel spill. President Sacá attended the rally, but the former ARENA presidents were noticeably absent.

[13](#). (SBU) Like the November 11 FMLN rally, supporters were turned away at the gates and were forced to listen from outside the stadium or peer down from the hillside overlooking the stadium. The crowd, while equal in size to the crowd assembled by the FMLN in November, was less enthusiastic than ARENA and Avila likely had expected and did not have the electricity⁸ shown by Funes and the FMLN supporters. While the crowd did appear festive in person, it seemed more subdued on the subsequent television coverage.

Strong Delivery, But No Running Mate Yet

[14](#). (SBU) Contrary to some predictions, Avila did not name his running mate at the rally. Avila appeared relaxed and confident during his 30 minute speech which focused on the future of El Salvador.

Speech Highlights: Freedom and Growth; Not Class Warfare

[15](#). (SBU) Avila decried the FMLN's politics of continued confrontation, adding that the FMLN is still seeking old solutions⁸ to economic problems: nationalization, expropriation, and the restriction of free speech. Avila

said that the country has achieved some reconciliation in the post-war period, but that the future of the country was &in play.⁸ Avila appealed to all Salvadorans to work together and reject the class warfare espoused by the FMLN.

¶16. (SBU) Avila called for improved healthcare, complete with increased access to medicine and improved infrastructure. He also called for raising pensions, including providing a &solidarity pension⁸ for those in need who currently receive no monthly income. (Note: In an interview conducted immediately after the speech, President Saca echoed Avila's call by asking the Minister of Economy to study the possibility of a pension increase. End note.) He proposed increasing financial aid for university students and helping job-seekers find employment. He also recognized the difficult role of women in El Salvador and called for assistance for those who work to support their families.

¶17. (SBU) Avila then turned to security and called for an El Salvador where no one is above the law and where citizens respect the law. He said El Salvador must be ready to face the security challenges of the 21st century and the armed forces must be equipped to meet the challenges of civil defense.

¶18. (SBU) On the economic side, Avila called for pro-growth policies that would encourage tourism, support the agricultural sector, permit the construction of electricity generating plants, and improve the country's infrastructure. He spoke of an El Salvador strong enough to protect the environment by producing clean power that would protect the water supply. He made an appeal to the supporters that had been bused in from the countryside by pledging to bring

progress to the rural areas.

¶19. (SBU) Avila also pledged support to Salvadorans living abroad. He said he was committed to building an economically stronger El Salvador, so that Salvadorans would no longer have to leave the country to seek better opportunities.

¶10. (SBU) Avila also pledged support for small enterprises, including the formation of a &solidarity bank⁸ to provide low-cost financing. He envisioned the construction of a &port city⁸ at the soon-to-be-inaugurated port at La Union. In an appeal to the working class, Avila called on the government, employers, and workers to meet immediately and agree upon a raise in the minimum wage.

¶11. (SBU) Wrapping up his speech, Avila returned to his theme of a &just, strong, generous, and free⁸ El Salvador and asserted that economic growth required freedom) freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of initiative. He said that those who want to live in peace outnumber those who seek to return to conflict and those who support terrorist groups. We, he said, are the majority and in a democracy the majority always wins. Avila concluded his speech with a promise to reduce poverty and exclusion, to end corruption and the abuse of consumers, and to provide greater opportunity for all Salvadorans.

¶12. (C) Comment: ARENA's efforts to fill the stadium paid off and the afternoon deluges common this time of year stayed in check until after the event. Worries among ARENA officials about Avila's ability to deliver a strong speech should be diminished - he performed well, in fact better than many had expected. The response from the over 50,000 ARENA supporters in the stadium however, was underwhelming, with merely polite applause at points during Avila's speech and very few moments of exuberant support. Comparison with the November FMLN event is inevitable, and reinforces the perception in El Salvador that while the FMLN is energized to win, ARENA is heading into the March 2009 presidential election still reeling from its bruising internal nomination process and with a candidate who has yet to energize the party faithful. End Comment.